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Keywords: poetry; philosophy; technic; Kierkegaard; Wallace Stevens; Jean Wahl; Martin Heidegger

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Lord of the door: Kierkegaard, Stevens, and the poetry of thought

Adam Staley Groves¹

Abstract

Before anything else Søren Kierkegaard is considered a philosopher however Jean André Wahl writes “He is not a philosopher, he would say ... and had no philosophy to call ‘philosophy of existence’ or to oppose other philosophies.” Wahl’s depiction raises essential questions. If Kierkegaard is not a philosopher how should we regard him? Furthermore, what might we learn about contemporary life (if not philosophy itself) if we understand Kierkegaard’s persona and insight independent of its philosophical frame? To develop our understanding Kierkegaard is considered akin to Wallace Stevens’s concept of “a poetry of thought” which designates a theory of poetry according to poets distinct from philosophy. For both Kierkegaard and Stevens authored singular prose thus we should not ignore the nature of his theory which may belong to poetry as potentially validated by Jean Wahl, a philosopher whom Stevens befriended.

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In the opening chapter of *Philosophies of existence* (1959) Jean Wahl writes

Kierkegaard, who is the father of all these philosophies, would decline the name of philosopher of existence: he would object not to the word ‘existence’ but to the word ‘philosopher’. He is not a philosopher, he would say; he is a religious man and has no philosophy to call ‘philosophy of existence’ or to oppose to other philosophies. (3)

Why is Kierkegaard considered a philosopher? Kierkegaard influenced Heidegger, Wahl, and many others however, influence does not make one a philosopher. Perhaps influence is misunderstood? A teacher once said we are all born

philosophers. He also said it takes ten years to become an academic philosopher. However, children begin questioning only after the first year. If philosophy is primarily questioning, we recognize its source is the imagination. In other words questioning or mediation moves from contemplation to *praxis*. This is how philosophy returns from the imagination to the world. Proof of contemplation is questioning however, questioning is not a given; it may conceal or lack contemplation.

Contemplation concerns a “pre-relational realm” according to F. H. Bradley or “pre-predicative element” as with Edmund Husserl. In *The philosopher’s way* (1948) Jean Wahl says “this realm is given to [hu]man[s] as an existent being” or “the idea of existence as emphasized by Kierkegaard.” The use of ‘pre’ concerns an

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absolute *before* existence. What is *existent* authenticates this supposition by contemplation. Therefore if “[e]xistence stands in a natural relation to what transcends it” as Wahl says, the *before* and *beyond* intermingle and bookend mediation (11).

Contemplation is generally defined as ‘lengths of time’, ‘with,’ ‘a stretch,’ or ‘cut of time’. The things of contemplation are pieces of time. Contemplation requires a look of the mind so we suppose speculation weaves fragments of time. It may be the soul wears the garment of time. Nonetheless, contemplation concerns the ancient Greek word *theōria*. F. E. Peters defined it as “viewing,” “speculation,” “contemplation” or “contemplative life.” Heidegger’s use particular to *The Letter on Humanism* (1946) is strange, he says “In order to experience the essence of thinking purely ... we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking” (218). Heidegger claims *theōria* is not pure thinking because it “already occurs within” technical interpretation. This he calls a “reactive attempt” by philosophy “to rescue thinking and preserve its autonomy over against acting and doing” or why philosophy faces destitution rather a “predicament of having to justify itself before the sciences” (218).

Heidegger prefaces pure thinking on a “liberation of language from grammar” of a “more original essential framework ... reserved for thought and poetic creation” (218). When he considers thinking “is by and for the truth of Being” which is “never past” and “sustains” the human condition, he notes technical conditioning reaches back to Plato and Aristotle who “take thinking itself to be a *technē*” or praxis. While not entirely wrong it has been argued to begin with the Pythagoreans. It may well be anachronistic. And yet, if *theōria* is pure thinking without technical interpretation was Heidegger still talking about philosophy? For he finds ‘the immediate’ or non-practical thinking a truth of questioning or mediation itself. The truth is that philosophy begins and may end as

he claims by “a *technē*, a process of reflection in service to doing and making” (218). This seems an influence shared with Kierkegaard.

In other words Heidegger turns to a mode of poetic thinking shared between poetry and philosophy; a novelty which “exceeds all contemplation because it cares for the light in which a seeing, as *theōria*, can first live and move” (262). This he tethers to the “thinking of Being” placed paradoxically in relation to “theoretical and practical behavior” (262). Here poetic thinking seems opposed to mediation and conceptualization as philosophy. In other words Heidegger exits philosophy and tries to codify what belongs to poetry itself. By doing so he brings into philosophy a problematic desire of “thinking in its saying” which “merely brings the unspoken word of Being into language” (262). Problematic because writing is a technical conditioning as he notes to the letter’s recipient. Problematic because this desire is born from a conflation of poetry and philosophy wherefrom questioning seems more an affirmation exterior to mediation. So I am compelled to ask why “the unspoken” must be made public? Would that not threaten access to pure thinking – is this not what poetry guards? (218, 262)

Poetry, philosophy, and the fundamental differences regarding Stevens’s “true subject”

Heidegger demonstrates philosophical questioning comes from poetic contemplation; it is the *way* they share of which the *how* is named poetical – for the activity of poetry itself is *how*. This is why I consider art, philosophy, and science the following way: it is, what is it?, it is this. Such concerns the immediate, mediate, and concept; an interdependent circuit which concerns the entering and exiting of knowledge and world. Ultimately these depend upon

a speculative fourth or poetry itself, a supreme poetry; thus Wallace Stevens's speculative questioning whether or not supreme fiction must be human.² That is, knowledge and its technological condition concerns the world of humans, humanity, and humanism under the reins of technic – a world system which seemingly resembles poetry itself.

Heidegger's revanchist posture concerns a thinking without questioning weirdly rendered as questioning by pure thinking. This reads similar to what Stevens identifies in "A collect of philosophy" (1951) as "the poetry of thought." Heidegger does such, as Stevens depicts for other philosophers, by "deliberate probing" for an "integration" of concepts (854, 863). Using Stevens criterion means Heidegger sought the true subject as subject matter explicitly for *Being by the light* which integrates domains of science and technology. This Stevens contrasts to "the poet" whose discovery "is fortuitous" and generally "before the poet has found his [true] subject."³ (863) The distinction concerns intent in the act of constructing an account of poetry itself. If I am a philosopher, I intend not for poetry but philosophy, then that is what I will find. If one operates from poetry, what they find sources intent from an absolute certainty from which philosophy was estranged.

From Stevens one may assess that Heidegger projects the energy of poetic affirmation found in the encounter or its appearance to his imagination with intent for the subject matter of philosophy. In his "Letter on Humanism" we find one directs this 'light' as critical questioning for the growth of philosophy against "[t]hinking ... on the descent to the poverty of its provisional essence" (265). Yet Heidegger's pure theōria – the view of poetry applied – cannot exist in the mediative domain which concerns earthly dwelling. Heidegger's de-

spair means to profane the subject's notion of objective chance according to Stevens by making public "the unspoken word" which grasps the dream, the intelligence, the praeternatural potency of the imagination. Here "descent" marks the falling of one's sustaining a light of thinking. The ground of any "provisional essence" is not a poverty rather the hinge to the loss of intent and subject matter; it is to fear enthrallment by the true subject. Thus when Heidegger attempts to codify it philosophically he is opposed not only to Stevens but Kierkegaard in regard to *how*; yet particular to Hegel, that the subject be made fully public; that the absolute incarnates in the world and pure reason has been made meld (265).

As noted, Heidegger's *way* may be a failure to think through the appearance (named Being) to that philosopher. Writes Wahl in *The philosopher's way* (1948)

Nietzsche tried to remain faithful to appearances, finding in them a greater depth than the illusory depth of an imagined world behind the world of phenomena. This idea is comparable to that expressed by Kierkegaard when he speaks of the matured or second immediate, that is, the immediate one attains after one has passed through religious experience. (199)

This may have occurred for Heidegger in 1936–37 when *Contributions to philosophy* was written and *die Khere* takes root. Nonetheless *The letter on humanism* of 1947 clarifies it was experience

This turning is not a change of standpoint from *Being and time*, but in it the thinking that was sought first arrives at the location of that dimension out of which *Being and time* is experienced, that is to say, experi-

²Wallace Stevens and Holly Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 863–864.

³I refer to Stevens's prose "The irrational element in poetry" (1936) which profers an early conceptualization of the poetry of thought.

enced from the fundamental experience of the oblivion of Being. (231–232)

Kierkegaard, Stevens, and a poetry of thought

What we call philosophy is ever-only supposed by the imagination which comes from a real as contemplated in the unreal of metaphysical imagination. For Stevens this incredibility is precisely the true subject's credibility. It's what we do with it that matters and not a matter of 'forcing'. In my account Heidegger enters into the poetry of thought to rescue the vanquished Being of philosophy; similarly what Hegel sought in his *Aesthetic lectures*: to codify what cannot be codified. Poetry itself is less when reduced to religion. Kierkegaard understood this. How might we ascertain Kierkegaard in terms of the poetry of thought; beyond philosophemes or memes of angst and dread?

Stevens says one may encounter something "inherently poetic" when it "gives the imagination sudden life" yet if there is "poetic nature" in the concepts of Kierkegaard namely existence, one does not always find "poetic thinking" (857). This depends on the reader and the element which presents it. Furthermore poetic thinking is not the same thing as "poetic writing." There can be philosophic writing which carries poetic thinking, et cetera. It may come to what Stevens determines "[a] poet's natural way of thinking is by way of figures" (852) moreover, thinking by figures has a relation to what Judith Balso calls in *Affirmation of poetry* (2016) a type of universal figure or "organizer of the poem" differentiated from any *existent* (101). One way Stevens expressed this in verse may be the figure of Crispin or the giant, nonetheless, how does Kierkegaard if not pseudonymically, as had Fernando Pessoa

with his heteronyms?⁴

A universal figure does not have to mean any God, gods, or Christ personification. In *The philosopher's way* (1948) Jean Wahl clarifies that "Kierkegaard in one of his first works very justly opposed the Greek idea of personification and the Christian idea of the incarnation of the Deity" (226). At base the absolute paradox of Kierkegaard's "doctrine of how" as Wahl depicts is a key feature of a poetry of thought. It means the true subject is disclosed fortuitously in the element or fabric of time whether fabrication as writing, the world, of an integument we name existence, pieces of flesh or time held in the mind, or any basis a subject of reality attaches to as configurations. For such are gathered thus guarded supremely by paradox. Such was conceptualized by Wahl who depicts Kierkegaard's doctrine in the following way:

I form a relation, an intense, fervent relation, with a thing that is absolutely without relation. And this paradox defines existence, insofar as it can be defined.

The crucial thing is not *what* I believe in – not the object of my belief – but the *way* in which I believe in that object. If I believe in an absolute way, then it is the Absolute that I believe in.

It is therefore the *how* of my belief that defines the object (or rather, what others call object, for in reality it is no such thing) (19–20).

The *way* and *how* aligns with Stevens's true subject of poetry which is "paramount" or why he considers this doctrine from Wahl in *Adagia* (921). Whatever subject matter is gathered by *the way*, it is an orderly development by the true subject in relation to "an absolute object" which exceeds the world of philosophy; why

⁴Balso defines "organizer" in this way: "it would not be a question of grasping the "sense" of the poem, no more so than it would be a question of explaining its "meaning," one must grasp the indirect of the poem as the organizer in the poem of some figures of thought specific to it" (101).

Heidegger's "unspoken word of Being into language" is problematic. To be clear, relation to the true subject or 'the way' need not be in the content form of poetry – it is a poetic way of thinking we are concerned with and finally, *how* it is used in terms of the world.

In Kierkegaard's *Either / Or*, namely "An ecstatic discourse" (1987) we find not only a denouncement of poets and poetry, we find a scene of their murder. The illustration concerns the screams of poets roasting alive in the bronze bull of Phalaris; an oven which converts the poets' agonies into beautiful music a tyrant enjoys at a distance. Such figures hold curious symmetry to Wahl's comments on the immediate and mediate, specific to religious experience rather what supposes "the matured or second immediate" in regard to "an inaccessible ideal" Wahl seeks to reaffirm "even if it prove only a myth" namely "man's situation characterized by distance and transcendence" (199). For these poets give music to the king or figure of the philosopher. Nonetheless, here Kierkegaard is nowhere to be seen however it is his description which presents what Wahl calls "the unceasing transformation" of "mediate and the immediate ... into each other" (199). This is but one motif of a poetry of thought which selects figures of myth.

We find next "hereditary sin." Says Kierkegaard "whom does the child have to thank for his first thrashings, whom else but his parents" (19). What a "child wants is Da-da," a father. It seems philosophy desires the child, the source of questioning or Heidegger's "provisional essence" should one descend from the light of Being (265). Says Kierkegaard: People are "unreasonable" or why "I prefer to talk to children, for one may still dare to hope that they may become rational beings" only to retort "but those who have become that – good Lord!" (19) Kierkegaard's interrelation of the rational and irrational dovetails with Stevens's concepts found in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" more precisely when Kierkegaard's il-

lustration concludes on the freedom of thought in contrast to freedom of speech "people never use the freedoms they have but demand those they do not have; they have the freedom of thought – they demand freedom of speech" (19). Stevens regards a similar freedom of the "slightest sound" and the "most momentary rhythm" that "you are free" to do poetry as you like "but your freedom must be consonant with others ... [w]hat is true of sounds is true of everything: the feeling for words, without regard to their sound ... an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning" (790).

Unwritten rhetoric concerns the true subject. It aligns with "Tested Advice for Authors" says Kierkegaard "Do not despise typographical errors ... become witty by means of typographical errors ... a legitimate way to become witty." He queries to "call to mind that it is through sin that one gains a first glimpse of salvation" (20). Here writing retains or eludes to the wholly Other by virtue of a typo, a sin which lacks fidelity to the imagination or initial immediate as mere facsimilia – a secondary immediate; the copy is yet to be original. Writing is an element seeded with the irrational. But I need ask if Heidegger's 'poverty of thinking' is an inability to listen to poetic thinking? Specifically in his letter when he questions of the irrational: "For a long time now, all too long, thinking has been stranded on dry land. Can then the effort to return thinking to its element be called 'irrationalism'?" (219) The immediate, unwritten rhetoric of Stevens can be found haunting when Kierkegaard remarks the typo is "not a point of departure":

If he thinks there is any movement in what has been said, this demonstrates the same thing. But for those listeners who are able to follow me, although I do not move, I shall now elucidate the eternal truth by which this philosophy is self-contained and does not concede anything higher.

Experience shows that it is not at all difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. It begins, in fact, with nothing and therefore can always begin. But it is always difficult for philosophy and philosophers to stop. (39)

Kierkegaard leaves a footnote on being and non-being in relation or “the unity of being and nothing ... non-being which is at the same time being” (39, 614). Here Heidegger’s “oblivion of Being” is marked, in a way by Kierkegaard.⁵ Yet if being and non-being mark the correlation of a beginning, the literal open and closed door, what here are we opened to? Kierkegaard finds himself lord of a door to the absolute, which is the poet’s task one may not want, and usually does not.

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⁵In fairness Heidegger seeks to increase the potency of letters by reducing a type of philosophical growth. Essentially what he does seem to destroy philosophy to himself. This may be a more accurate concept of influence.